

## DIVINE REVERENCE FOR US: GOD'S BEING PRESENT, CHERISHING, AND PERSUADING

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**I**N THE SPIRIT of our United States Founding Fathers, we live in a tradition of reverence for human dignity. Our respect for the life and freedom of every human person is grounded in a conviction that in this regard all are created equal. As our national community became aware of slavery's irreverence, slavery was abolished. As we became aware that denying the vote and forcing segregation were irreverent, these evils were largely overcome. Frequently those who challenged irreverence did so in the name of God, who has reverence for all human persons and invites us to have an analogous reverence.

In recent years, however, we have become aware of irreverence growing in our world: violent crime, death of the handicapped, abortion, starvation, torture, threat of nuclear war. Rightly we feel pangs of discontent at this irreverence. How can we challenge it? What are its roots? Three roots of irreverence are a failure to be realistically present to those who suffer, a failure to cherish all persons, and a failure to persuade others rather than coerce them.

A failure to be realistically present to those who suffer is evidenced by the phenomenon of psychic numbing. Robert Jay Lifton has studied this deadening of awareness in survivors of Hiroshima and in workers who produce nuclear bombs and missiles.<sup>1</sup> Hiroshima survivors tell others that they were out of town when the bomb exploded, and some think it themselves despite physiological and psychological evidence to the contrary. The reality is too evil to face. Analogously, arms producers and deployers refuse to talk about missiles or weapons, only "vehicles" or "delivery systems." For them there come to be no bombs or warheads, only "devices" or "nose cones." The cover-up of psychic numbing is directly irreverent toward the human right to truth and the natural human knowing process; it may also be used as a cultivated and invalid excuse for further irreverence against human life and freedom.

EDITOR'S NOTE.—This is the third in a series of articles in philosophical theology by the John Courtney Murray Group. The central theme of the series is the development of an inculturated theology for the U.S. through the retrieval, in a theological context, of classical North American philosophy. The first two articles appeared in the December 1982 and March 1983 issues and dealt respectively with conversion and discernment. Two further essays will concentrate on religious affectivity and on the community called to conversion.

<sup>1</sup> *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (New York: Random House, 1968).

A failure to cherish all persons is evidenced by the fact that some in the United States lack effective respect for life—life of the handicapped, of the unborn, of those who starve to death because global resources go to the arms race. A great variety of researchers state that starvation could be eliminated if between 5% and 10% of the global arms budget were devoted to the fight against hunger.<sup>2</sup> As early as 1976 the Holy See's Statement to the United Nations put the truth strongly: "The arms race is to be condemned unreservedly. . . . [It is] *in itself an act of aggression* against those who are the victims of it. It is an act of aggression which amounts to a crime, for *even when they are not used*, by their cost alone *armaments kill the poor by causing them to starve.*"<sup>3</sup> Were we free from psychic numbing or cover-up, we would name the arms race what it is: objective mass murder, a serious irreverence against human life.

A failure to persuade and a lapse into coercion is evidenced by our nation's threatening others with arms rather than inviting others with wise diplomacy and with farsighted and foresighted economic policies. Those who control the First and Second Worlds think they are threatened, so they threaten, are threatened in return, and so on in a vicious spiral. Moreover, our "national security" mentality brings torture as well as starvation to the Third World. Dom Helder Câmara challenges us "to continue to demand an end to torture, but we must discover the roots of torture. These roots lie in the absolutization of 'national security.' This ideology came from the United States to the high-level military schools in Latin America."<sup>4</sup> Were we free from psychic numbing or cover-up, we would name the national-security mentality what it is: objective support of torture, a serious irreverence against human freedom.

The religious person can challenge these three roots by recalling that God made us in His image and likeness. God is reverent toward us, and God invites us to be analogously reverent toward one another. Since our irreverence is rooted in a lack of presence, of cherishing, and of persuasion, we may be helped by centering on a God who is reverently present to us, who cherishes us, who persuades us and does not coerce. Such divine reverence for us is the focus of the present article's three main sections. They are preceded by a section on a method which incorporates reverence for the rich subjectivity of the human knower and for the multifaceted character of the object known.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael T. Klare, "The Global Arms Trade," and Patrice Franko, "Swords into Plowshares: Demilitarizing Development Strategies," *New Catholic World* 226, no. 1346 (March–April 1982) 64–67 and 74–77.

<sup>3</sup> "Statement of the Holy See to the United Nations (1976)," in *A Race to Nowhere: An Arms Race Primer for Catholics* (Chicago: Pax Christi, U.S.A.) 44. All emphasis within texts cited in this article is that of the original authors.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph E. Mulligan, "The United States and Brazil: An Interview with Dom Helder Câmara," *America* 141, no. 10 (Oct. 13, 1979) 194.

Philosophy is my professional field, and within it I focus mainly on the philosophy of God. The two thinkers who help me most are William Ernest Hocking (1873–1966) and Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947). Hocking centered on religious experience, bringing together the best from his teachers Williams James and Josiah Royce. Whitehead constructed the original system around which the tradition of North American process philosophy and theology has grown. Since we three are philosophers, we begin our reflections from human experience—that experience taken whole. We would lack wholeness if we excluded from our data faith experience or its expression, including its expression in Scripture. Hocking and Whitehead are free to quote Scripture—not as proof texts but as reports of human experience—and I am free to quote them quoting Scripture. Yet we do philosophy of God and not theology.

The distinctive contribution of this article is that it sketches a philosophy of divine reverence for us. Since our method includes reverent musement, whole-aspect alternation, and mystic-prophet alternation, these receive brief attention in an initial section. Since the divine reverence for us is expressed in God's being present, cherishing, and persuading, these three aspects of the divine life are the foci of the article's three main sections. Hocking and Whitehead help me develop all these points, but in the article their reflections are subordinate to mine. The strong focus on divine reverence and the organization of thought to develop the notion of reverence are my contribution.

#### HUMAN REVERENCE IN METHOD: MUSEMENT AND ALTERNATION

A method appropriate for a philosophical approach to God's reverence for us is analogous to a way of developing a friendship. At times it is informal; it both takes in the whole picture and centers on details; it involves give-and-take.

Musement is a first important aspect of our method, an aspect first developed by Charles Sanders Peirce and further developed by Josiah Royce, then by Hocking, Whitehead, and others. It is a way of gradually coming to an insight and then confirming it, without relying mainly on clear mathematical intuition or formal logical demonstration. We cannot simply look at a person and say "friend" the way we look at a mathematical figure and say "triangle." Nor can we give a logical demonstration that a person is a friend the way we demonstrate a geometrical theorem. There are hard and fast rules neither for developing a friendship nor for musement, but there are helps. We need to be with a person for some time to become friends; so we need to muse about a topic for some time in order gradually to see the light. In making friends we use imagination, and informally we catch loose analogies between a new friend and some old friend; so also musement is imaginative and uses analogies. About a

friend-to-be we notice not merely facts but also values; we do not just understand, we feel attracted by beauty of character; so musement is open to value, to feeling, to beauty. Friends do not let themselves become trapped in excessive seriousness; so musement can be playful. Friends tell each other stories, true and make-believe; so musement uses narratives, be they history or myth or parable.

The last paragraph is itself an example of musement. I made no attempt to define it by genus and species. Rather, I offered an analogy between musement and developing a friendship, then touched informally on various aspects of the analogy to offer some insight into what musement is about. Nor did I try to prove that musement exists. Rather, I let myself experience some musement, told about it, and invited the reader to notice. Now religious experience is developing a friendship with God. It is only natural that musement should be of service to it.

In general, alternation is rhythmic shifting of attention which keeps human experiencing both realistic and alive. Hocking is the thinker who makes it most explicit, but it is present in Royce, Whitehead, and others.

Alternation between vision of a whole and centering on an aspect is a second important facet of our method. In getting to know a friend, we now size up the other as a whole, now zero in on some definite character trait. Then we back away to get the person more into perspective, follow by again centering on some particular. We feel the general thrust of the other's life, and single events also invite our attention. There is a similar whole-aspect alternation in our coming to know a community and its history. Now we take in the group as a whole and notice the networks of relationships, now we center on the character of a particular individual.

Whole-aspect alternation enables us to overcome both narrowness and vagueness, each in turn. It combats the overly analytic tendency of many thinkers since Hobbes and Descartes, the temptation to fragment reality by reifying what are only aspects of a unified whole—perhaps because this fabricates false security by psychically numbing us to other aspects which we do not control. It also combats the tendency to vagueness of thinkers who analyze too little and so fail to notice much.

Alternation between receiving and contributing is a third important aspect of our method. It is exemplified in the give-and-take of friends. Now one receives from the other, now he or she gives. A friendship will stagnate and die if either person does nothing but give or nothing but receive, nothing but challenge or nothing but appreciate. Each phase is meant to prepare for the next contrasting phase. As Hocking puts it in religious language, "the meaning of the mystic experience is prophetic."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *MG* 439. *MG* refers to Hocking, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience* (New Haven: Yale University, 1912).

An everyday mystic is any person who in a broad sense is receptive in prayer; an everyday prophet is any person who in a broad sense is productive of some lasting good effect.<sup>6</sup>

We are called to be mystics and prophets, each in its turn. "It is by the alternation of loyalty and worship that each life must hold and increase its individual level of value."<sup>7</sup> In mystical moments of worship we increase our value by being receptive to God's gift of renewed purpose. In prophetic moments of loyalty we hold our value by acting in accord with our gift; purpose not acted upon is weakened. Like others for whom religion naturally leads to ethics and vice versa, I find that to teach the philosophy of God invites me also to teach ethics and vice versa. My religious appreciation of God's reverence leads me to an ethical challenge confronting human irreverence such as arms production, and my ethics of human reverence leads me to a natural theology of divine reverence.

Mystic-prophet alternation is based on the fact that we should act in accord with who we are and who others are. Hocking recognizes that "the Christian code becomes possible, even imperative" when we perceive each human person as "having something of the divine in him—'ye have done it unto me'—hence worthy of reverence, 'even the least of these.' This the deepest reach of the Christian ethic is an immediate consequence of the deepest reach of its world view, whereby each person participates in the life of God."<sup>8</sup> The Christian world view includes the recognition that God's reverence makes every person participate in divine life—at least in that, like God, we can know, love, and freely decide. As a consequence, each of us is invited to join God in reverencing every person, others or self. Accordingly, the divine reverence for us will be the article's central focus, a more mystical receptive focus; but at times we will employ alternation and shift to a more prophetic focus on the reverence we should have for one another.

#### GOD WHO IS REVERENTLY PRESENT

A first major characteristic of all reverence is not distance but presence. In some times and places formality has been or is a sign of reverence, since then and there it could facilitate presence. Yet formality is not necessarily connected with reverence; if it brings about distance, it is a problem. Normally, presence of an appropriate kind is a first sign of reverence, and we should not be surprised that it is a characteristic of divine reverence.

<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, this use of "prophet" is very analogous, but it can be justified by the fact that the everyday prophet "challenges" the inadequacy of a situation which was less good before his or her contribution than after.

<sup>7</sup> *MG* 439-40.

<sup>8</sup> *CWC* 94. *CWC* refers to Hocking, *The Coming World Civilization* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958).

The recent "death of God" theology denied God's presence. For it, God first lived as transcendent, then really emptied Himself in the Incarnation and really annihilated Himself in Christ's death. Thus "a radically profane history is the inevitable consummation of an actual movement of the sacred into the profane."<sup>9</sup> The "good news" is that we are no longer dominated by a transcendent absolute.

We never were thus dominated. "Death of God" theologians correctly challenged the man-made idol of a coercive absolute who would accord us no responsibility, who would give us no participation in the divine knowing and loving and deciding. But they were mistaken to challenge God's continuing existence and presence. With Hocking and Whitehead, I hold for a God who does not coerce us but does enliven us. We experience our best selves in the presence of such a God.

In my philosophy the first main characteristic of God's reverence for us is divine presence to us. I reflect on three aspects. God's presence sustains us, enlivening us and giving us purpose. God's presence supports our better selves, opening us to our responsibility and to reality as it is. God's presence may be directly verified in holistic experience; it invites our receptive attention and does not require proof.

God's presence sustains us, giving us life and purpose. As Hocking puts it, God is "experienced . . . as a creative will sustaining my own being (hence caring for my existence), an activity inviting a response."<sup>10</sup> In metaphysical terms, through efficient causation God sustains my being; through final causation God invites my response. The sustaining-inviting is one divine activity. In Whitehead's system God communicates creativity by establishing a free creature as most basically an aim, a purpose. God's power simultaneously sustains a free creature's existence and invites the creature's harmonious activity: "The power by which God sustains . . . is the power of himself as the ideal"<sup>11</sup> inviting our response. Such power is exercised with reverence; as we shall see more fully in the section on God's persuasion, it sustains us and invites us but does not coerce.

God's presence supports our better selves, opening us to our own responsibility and to reality as it is. Both zest and peace are signs of God's presence. "It is the immanence of the Great Fact including this initial Eros and this final Beauty which constitutes the zest of self-forgetful transcendence belonging to Civilization at its height."<sup>12</sup> The

<sup>9</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 109.

<sup>10</sup> *MG* xiii (1963). In 1963 Hocking wrote an additional preface to the major work he had written fifty years earlier. References to the new preface add "1963" after the page number.

<sup>11</sup> *RM* 156. *RM* refers to Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan, 1926).

<sup>12</sup> *AI* 381. *AI* refers to Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan, 1933).

"Great Fact" refers to God; in Whitehead "immanence" does not imply pantheism but does refer to divine presence. As "initial Eros," God enlivens and invites us by giving us purpose; as "final Beauty," God cherishes our excellence. The divine inviting is immediately experienced in our zest. Trust in the harmony of the universe which God invites toward beauty makes possible our self-forgetful transcendence. In similar terms, Hocking finds that the experience of God's presence underlies our "self-confidence," our "empirical openness," and our sense of "responsibility."<sup>13</sup> Religion which appreciates God's enlivening presence is far from an opiate.

God's presence is directly verified in holistic experience; it invites our receptive attention and does not require proof. We can "directly verify" God's presence and existence.<sup>14</sup> We take part in an "encounter" with God, "the theme of the mystics of all ages."<sup>15</sup> We can all be everyday mystics who experience God in "*the forward thrust of being, . . . felt but inarticulate. This never-assertive but never-absent metaphysical sense of process-and-direction to which all action trusts itself is, I dare say, the most primitive form of faith object; and our commitment thereto the dimmest version of natural religion.*"<sup>16</sup> We need not articulate what is never absent; it need not be subjected to analysis. Its nonassertiveness is a sign of God's reverence for our intelligence and freedom: God does not coerce our assent, as might a mathematical proposition; rather, God invites us to trust, as would a personal friend.

Now that our notion of divine presence has been sketched, we can understand better why "death of God" thinkers overlooked God's abiding presence. Since God is present sustaining my own life and inviting me, an overly analytic mode of thought might notice only self and not God. Thinkers influenced mainly by a European tradition from Hobbes and Descartes to Nietzsche are in danger of being trapped in analysis. Alternating from the analytic to the holistic mode, classic North Americans more easily notice the immediate experience of God's presence. It should be noted that a contemporary European such as Karl Rahner is sufficiently holistic and aware of God's presence. Thus, in his theology of grace Rahner stresses that grace is a gift of divine life which becomes intrinsic to us,<sup>17</sup> does respect our freedom and responsibility,<sup>18</sup> and is experienced by us.<sup>19</sup> I find Rahner more helpful in leading an overly analytic person step by step toward regaining wholeness. I find Hocking's

<sup>13</sup> MG 295-96.

<sup>15</sup> MG xii (1963).

<sup>14</sup> MG xi (1963).

<sup>16</sup> CWC 98.

<sup>17</sup> *Theological Investigations* 1 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961) 302-10.

<sup>18</sup> *Grace in Freedom* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 228-29.

<sup>19</sup> *Theological Investigations* 4 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 178-84.

and Whitehead's inviting and imaginative expression more helpful in deepening a person's understanding of spontaneous holistic experience.

By now it should be clear that our reverent method for guiding human experience is a help toward being aware of God's reverent presence to us. We should not always demand proof; we should be open also to musement and direct experience of God's presence. We should not be trapped in analysis; we should be open also to holistic experience. We should not be caught in either the dropout of ceaseless contemplation or the burnout of driven action; we should alternate between a mystical prayer receptive to God's enlivening presence and a prophetic action loyal to a challenging aim given by God to each of us.

At the beginning of this section we saw that reverence requires neither formality nor distance; rather, it is characterized by presence. Another common misunderstanding is that the person revered must always be greater than the person revering. Yet God, who is the greatest, reveres each human person, reveres him as "having something of the divine in him—'ye have done it unto me'—hence worthy of reverence, 'even the least of these.'"<sup>20</sup> Our human reverence, too, is ultimately grounded not in individual varieties of human greatness but in what is true of the starving and tortured and of all men and women without exception: "each person participates in the life of God."<sup>21</sup> God is reverently present to each, sustaining life in the divine image and likeness.

#### GOD WHO REVERENTLY CHERISHES

A second major characteristic of all reverence is appreciative love: felt esteem for actualized value, particularly in persons. In scriptural accounts of religious experience, God cherishes us with feeling as would a mother, a father, a husband, or a brother. Yet Greek-influenced philosophy associated with God the problematic notion of "immutably perfect." As a result, some philosophers are of the opinion that God cannot experience a felt esteem for our good acts or a felt pain from our evil ones. Imagining that the perfect is changeless, they do not understand how we can make any difference to God. My position is that these philosophers consider God too abstractly and not holistically enough. They consider only the changeless divine core identity.

On the other hand, I distinguish between God's core identity and God's intentional consciousness, God's living operations of knowing, loving, and deciding. In this I agree with Whitehead that the "Divine Eros" includes more than a core of ideals; it includes also "the urge to their finite realization, each in its due season. Thus a process must be inherent

<sup>20</sup> CWC 94.

<sup>21</sup> CWC 94.



in God's nature, whereby His infinity is acquiring realization."<sup>22</sup> God's core identity is changeless; God cannot stop being God. Yet on the level of intentional consciousness—of knowing, loving, and freely deciding—it is more perfect (less limited) to experience living process than to be changeless. Immutability is a perfection only on the level of core identity. Immutability would be an imperfection on the level of living operations such as knowing, loving, and deciding.<sup>23</sup>

In my holistic philosophy the second main characteristic of divine reverence is God's cherishing us as persons. I reflect on four aspects. God's intentional consciousness is affected by what we do. God feels and remembers. When our acts are good, God feels delight and reinforces our delight. When our acts are evil, God shares our suffering, is not overcome by it, and encourages us not to be overcome.<sup>24</sup>

In intentional consciousness God is reverently receptive to us. Alternation is a characteristic of full and vibrant life. Should it not be an aspect of divine life as well as of human life? Such is our experience when we converse with God. Initially God speaks and we listen, then we speak and God listens. God's listening is an aspect of our holistic religious experience as Hocking recounts it: "For while God and Nature first become real to me because they determine me, they can only remain real, in so far as I also can successfully determine them, and as I intend."<sup>25</sup> When I freely affect another, I am not inclined to doubt the other's existence. Thus I experience God within the give-and-take of dialogue—of ethical discernment, of action, of prayer which is truly conversation. "I cannot passively find my friend as a ready-made friend"<sup>26</sup> applies also to friendship with God. The way in which I "make" God's intentional consciousness may be appreciated more fully through Whitehead's notion of a divine "Unity of Adventure." A first phase of this adventure is God's "Eros which is the living urge towards all possibilities," a loving invitation which urges us to grow and to relate. A second phase is God's "claiming the goodness of their realization"<sup>27</sup> as we actualize the possibilities. Our goodness and beauty are appreciated as contributions to the divine life. "This Beauty has always within it the renewal derived from the Advance

<sup>22</sup> *AI* 357.

<sup>23</sup> See my article "Integrating Thomistic and Whiteheadian Perspectives on God," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1981) 355-77.

<sup>24</sup> As we develop these aspects, it is particularly important to remember that our knowledge of God is always analogous. In these aspects God is different from us and not merely similar to us; our language falls far short of the divine reality. It should also be remembered that we center not on God's changeless core identity but on God's intentional consciousness, the living divine experience of knowing, loving, and deciding.

<sup>25</sup> *MG* 502.

<sup>26</sup> *MG* 140.

<sup>27</sup> *AI* 381.

of the Temporal World."<sup>28</sup> In the divine receptive phase God is renewed by our beauty, which God reverently cherishes.

God's receptivity is that "of a tenderness which loses nothing that can be saved."<sup>29</sup> Everlastingly God remembers our good. "The consequent nature of God is the fluent world become 'everlasting' by its objective immortality in God."<sup>30</sup> Since God does not forget, my deed achieves an immortality outside myself which satisfies the demands of a human "prophetic consciousness." For Hocking, this is not a present imagination of future actuality; it is a confidence that present action has a lasting effect. "It is an assurance of the future and of all time as determined by my own individual will, embodied in my present action."<sup>31</sup> Such an assurance is given in my low-keyed, holistic experience that one who does not forget is reverently receptive to me.

God feels delight in my good acts. There is no knowledge without an appropriate affective response, as Whitehead affirms by referring to all attentive experience as "feeling." God's feeling of esteem "is the mirror which discloses to every creature its own greatness."<sup>32</sup> Our human sense of worth is amplified by being mirrored back to us through the divine cherishing. One of Hocking's favorite Scripture texts, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me,"<sup>33</sup> suggests that God feels with delight the good we do for others and feels with pain the harm we do to them.

When we do wrong, God suffers from it but understands how the harm may be overcome. Whitehead uses the image "of the patience of God, tenderly saving the turmoil."<sup>34</sup> "God is the great companion, the fellow-sufferer who understands."<sup>35</sup> All-knowing, all-present, all-loving, God knows our human evil and the suffering it brings; God's affective response is the appropriate one, sympathy. With reverent patience, God does not overlook our suffering but shares it. Hocking recounts how we experience

<sup>28</sup> AI 381.

<sup>29</sup> PR 525. PR refers to Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929). Texts are cited as they appear in the Corrected Edition, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978). Pagination given is that of the original, available within brackets in the corrected edition and also available in other editions.

<sup>30</sup> PR 527. Whitehead makes no definitive statements for or against conscious personal immortality. Most interpreters agree with Charles Hartshorne in thinking that Whitehead's system tends toward its denial. In my December 1981 article in *International Philosophical Quarterly* I join those who hold that Whitehead's system tends toward the affirmation of conscious immortality. See especially Marjorie Suchocki, "The Question of Immortality," *Journal of Religion* 57 (1977) 298–302. Hocking consistently affirmed conscious immortality; he gave many sound philosophical reasons. See especially *The Meaning of Immortality in Human Experience* (New York: Harper, 1957).

<sup>31</sup> MG 503.

<sup>34</sup> PR 525.

<sup>32</sup> RM 155.

<sup>35</sup> PR 532.

<sup>33</sup> CWC 184.

the fact that God's suffering is redemptive: "Association. That pain which is taken in common, like effort which is carried on in common, is found through the association to lose its hardness."<sup>36</sup> Yet human association may cause destructive pain, may be terminated with the pain of loss, may be lacking in presence and knowledge. All-good, God is the only associate who cannot cause destructive pain. Eternal, God is the associate who most clearly cannot be lost. All-present and all-knowing, God is the perfect companion. Thus the burden of pain is best lifted by "God as intimate, infallible associate, present in all experience as That by Which I too may firmly conceive that experience from the outside. It is God in this personal relation . . . that alone is capable of establishing human peace of mind, and thereby human happiness."<sup>37</sup> I can peacefully conceive the painful experience and not be overcome because God my companion experiences it and is not overcome. Thus the work of God's reverence is in part to promote human solidarity, "to render the individual more perfectly open to experience."<sup>38</sup> Such openness encourages the sympathy which invites me to work with God toward overcoming evil, as we will see in reflection on God's persuading.

Our musement on God's cherishing has been holistic. God creates freely, so no mere analysis of who God must be can arrive at God's cherishing us. Again, an overly analytic approach may block our experience of being cherished. Again, too, wholeness is being retrieved by contemporary European thinkers, particularly existentialists and phenomenologists. Gabriel Marcel wrote *Royce's Metaphysics*,<sup>39</sup> corresponded with Hocking, avowed the influence of Royce and Hocking with regard to his central notions of community and holistic experience. Marcel, in turn, was one influence on Pope John Paul II's notions of sympathy, participation, and solidarity. Intertwining influences connect Royce, Hocking, Marcel, Martin Buber, Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, Karol Wojtyla, and others in their philosophies of community.<sup>40</sup> With this background we can better appreciate parts of Pope John Paul II's encyclical *On the Mercy of God*, parts which help us to experience God's felt esteem for our human dignity. We center on the parable of the prodigal son and on the crucifixion.

When the prodigal returns, the father's contagious merrymaking "indicates a good that has remained intact: even if he is a prodigal, a son

<sup>36</sup> MG 222.

<sup>37</sup> MG 224.

<sup>38</sup> MG 225.

<sup>39</sup> Chicago: Regnery, 1956.

<sup>40</sup> See especially Marcel, *Being and Having* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954); Wojtyla, *The Acting Person* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1979).

does not cease to be truly his father's son; it also indicates a good that has been found again, which in the case of the prodigal son was his return to the truth about himself."<sup>41</sup> Pope John Paul warns us that it would be a mistake to see in mercy a relationship of inequality such that "mercy belittles the receiver, that it offends the dignity of man." Rather, "the relationship of mercy is based on the common experience of that good which is man, on the common experience of the dignity which is proper to him."<sup>42</sup> Here is faithful cherishing, a divine reverence respectful of our abiding dignity as members of the divine family whether we return or we squander. Explicitly there is spontaneous "joyous emotion at the moment of the son's return home";<sup>43</sup> implicitly there is joy at all the son's good acts.

There is also felt pain at the son's squandering, which "could not be a matter of indifference to his father. It was bound to make him suffer."<sup>44</sup> Now when God suffers, He invites our mercy; thus mercy becomes reciprocal. "In a special way, God also reveals His mercy when He *invites men to have 'mercy' on His only Son, the crucified one.*"<sup>45</sup> Our free response should be one of loving compassion toward Christ, particularly as he is present in the hungry and the homeless: "As you did it to the least of these . . . you did it to me." Then our love "is not only an act of solidarity with the suffering Son of man, but also a kind of 'mercy' shown by each one of us to the Son of the eternal Father." In this "could man's dignity be more highly respected and ennobled, for, in obtaining mercy, He [Christ] is in a sense the one who at the same time 'shows mercy'?"<sup>46</sup> This "*disquieting model*" of "*Christ crucified*" emphasizes that "merciful love" ought to be "bilateral and reciprocal."<sup>47</sup> Pope John Paul's holistic philosophical notions of sympathy, participation, and solidarity shine through this challenging account of divine receptivity and reverent cherishing.

Mingled here are two somewhat different kinds of mercy. One is mercy for the sufferer—as for those who starve throughout the world because resources are squandered on arms. To feel this mercy, we need farsight, but with farsight sympathy comes spontaneously. Solidarity with "the least of these" requires mainly that we alternate out of narrow concerns

<sup>41</sup> Pope John Paul II, *On the Mercy of God* (1980) sect. 6, p. 22 in St. Paul ed.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, sect. 5, p. 20. In this context "father" need not represent the First Person of the Trinity. In context it is clear that God the Son suffers; there are no affirmations or implications regarding the Father.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, sect. 8, p. 28.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, sect. 14, p. 42.

in order to envision the human community as a whole. Without too much difficulty we participate in God's reverently cherishing those who starve.

But how easily do we cherish those prodigals whose squandering causes the starvation? A second kind of mercy is for the seeming sinner—as for those whose “defense spending” we may feel murders the starving, prepares their own nuclear suicide, and treasonously plays the Marxist game by causing class struggle. It is not easy to be reverent toward those who seem irreverent, especially when they are not among the least but among the powerful. Here we may need conversion ourselves in order that we may alternate at times from a more prophetic stance of challenging the sin toward a more mystical stance of cherishing the sinner as a person, shift from a centered focus on distinct structures of oppression toward a broader holistic vision of the human community which embraces both the oppressed and the oppressor. For this conversion to happen, we need divine persuasion.

#### GOD WHO REVERENTLY PERSUADES

A third major characteristic of all reverence is an active respect for value which promotes value's actual realization. This involves a positive fostering of value, its preservation, not destroying it, and resistance to its destruction. With regard to human persons, the values of life and of freedom call for special respect. Promoting these values means renouncing destructive coercion in favor of reverent persuasion. The destructive coercion to be renounced includes war and the threat of war, subversion, torture, and economic oppression. The reverent persuasion to be favored means inviting free choice by truthful communication based on concern for the good of all, a good which includes meeting basic needs such as the need for food and education.

Recently freedom has been receiving special attention from Latin American theologies of liberation. The major affirmations of such theologies fit well with our philosophy of reverence: they call for our conversion and renew our sense of responsibility; they rightly challenge legalized irreverence and promote conscientization which alerts us to structural injustices; they oppose destructive coercion and seek the reconciliation of all. We in the United States should listen, for we can cease exporting the arms and the national-security mentality which fuel destructive violence. We can foster economic changes which allow people now oppressed to free themselves and meet their basic needs. Yet we may fail to enter sufficiently into the Third World perspective and thus miss the reverent persuasion with which the theologians seek “to liberate the oppressors from their own power, from their ambition, and from their selfishness.”<sup>48</sup> How may we enter more into the perspective of others? A

<sup>48</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973) 275.

variety of actions and of reflections can be helpful. I suggest that one helpful reflection is concerned with deepening an appreciation of our common experience of God, a liberating God who does not coerce and who does persuade.

In my philosophy I make explicit a third main characteristic of divine reverence: God does not use destructive coercion, only reverent persuasion. I reflect on four aspects. The idolatry of coercion should be rejected and the divine persuasion affirmed. God's fidelity to persuading and not coercing means divine openness to the experience of tragedy. Divine persuasion as a rule operates quietly. If there is need, God may wrestle with us; even then, divine persuasion uses no destructive or manipulative force.

In rejecting coercive idols and affirming divine persuasion, I use some of Whitehead's historical musement. The history could be qualified, but it still sheds light on typical fabrications about God. We attack three idols: "God in the image of an imperial ruler, God in the image of a personification of moral energy, God in the image of an ultimate philosophical principle."<sup>49</sup> The latter two images are idolatrous only in exaggerated or exclusive forms. A reverent God does not manipulate but is a source of moral energy who enlivens and invites us by divine beauty. A reverent God is not the only free actuality but is the ultimate philosophical principle in the sense of being the "only . . . non-derivative actuality."<sup>50</sup> The imperial ruler is the most problematic idol. "When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered; and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers."<sup>51</sup> This is hardly full or accurate history, yet it reminds us of the temptation to use coercion which Church leaders have recurrently faced and not always resisted. I agree with Whitehead that Christ's "brief Galilean vision of humility" centers on deeper truths. Christ's vision "dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world."<sup>52</sup> In this text divine presence and cherishing are united with divine persuasion.

Within the development of Western religious thought which took place before Caesar conquered, Whitehead points to three peaks. The first is "Plato's publication of his final conviction . . . that the divine element in the world is to be conceived as a persuasive agency and not as a coercive agency."<sup>53</sup> The central moment is Christ's "revelation in act, of that

<sup>49</sup> *PR* 520.

<sup>50</sup> *PR* 48.

<sup>51</sup> *PR* 519.

<sup>52</sup> *PR* 520.

<sup>53</sup> *AI* 213.

which Plato divined in theory."<sup>54</sup> Thirdly, there is the theology of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Holy Spirit in which the Church Fathers suggested a metaphysical interpretation of how the divine persuasion might operate in the world.<sup>55</sup>

In my philosophy as in Whitehead's, God's fidelity to persuading and not coercing implies the divine acceptance of suffering from our evil choices and their results. "God is the great companion, the fellow-sufferer who understands."<sup>56</sup> As sufferer, God receives in intentional consciousness "each actual evil." As one who understands, God knows how evil may be overcome; by communicating that wisdom to us, God invites us to overcome evil so "as to issue in the restoration of goodness."<sup>57</sup> In so doing, God labors for the restoration of all goodness, including that of liberty, and not for the destruction of any goodness. "God's role is not the combat . . . of destructive force with destructive force; it lies in the patient operation of the overpowering rationality of his conceptual harmonization."<sup>58</sup> When God reverently challenges, we experience liberation. We are freed from the darkness of evil through the inspiration of God's "overpowering rationality," which can see a way out. We are liberated from the paralysis of evil through God's "tender patience leading . . . by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness."<sup>59</sup> Because we experience God's leading, we can experience peace even in the midst of tragedy. This is a deep peace, not a psychic numbing which imagines that there exists no evil such as economic oppression or political torture. Rather, this peace is "a trust in the efficacy of Beauty,"<sup>60</sup> a confidence that God can lead us beyond evil to the restoration of goodness. This peace's "first effect is the removal of the stress of acquisitive feeling arising from the soul's preoccupation with itself,"<sup>61</sup> thus removal of a chief cause of injustice. "One of its fruits is that passion whose existence Hume denied, the love of mankind as such."<sup>62</sup> If we experienced God as coercive, then we would be defensive—preoccupied with self. Since God is persuasive, then on the deepest level we can live without being threatened, in holistic unity with God and with all humankind in one universal community.

How do we experience the divine persuasion? With Hocking I suggest that God persuades in two different ways appropriate to different directions of human movement. If we are basically growing from good to better, then God invites us with "a still, small voice."<sup>63</sup> When we progress, God speaks softly—partly to remind us of the divine reverence for our

<sup>54</sup> AI 214. See also Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978).

<sup>55</sup> AI 216. See also Sobrino.

<sup>56</sup> PR 532.

<sup>57</sup> RM 155.

<sup>58</sup> PR 525–26.

<sup>59</sup> PR 526.

<sup>60</sup> AI 367.

<sup>61</sup> AI 367.

<sup>62</sup> AI 368.

<sup>63</sup> MG 224.

freedom and invite us to reverence one another's freedom, partly to remind us that "Supreme Power" is "non-competitive . . . —as Lao Tze glorifies the Tao that never asserts itself, as Christianity presents for adoration its God in the guise of an infant, an infant of the humblest."<sup>64</sup> God deals with us noncompetitively; we should deal with one another in like manner, even on a global level.

What if we are going from bad to worse? Then God does challenge us as a wrestler would—for our own strengthening. In such periods prayer means "that we maintain our discontent, returning again and again to the demand that our existence shall find itself justified in our own eyes. . . . This is the prayer of Jacob."<sup>65</sup> When we need to be awakened, God acts as an alarm clock. When we run away, the Hound of Heaven pursues. When we resist, God wrestles. God does not box, far less take up a sword or gun or bomb; that would be "destructive force." Rather God wrestles, strives, and suffers with us against evil, desiring not to harm us but to build us up for our overcoming evil. "Discontent" is experienced when "because of the God-nature within" those persons who need conversion "*call themselves sinners*" without losing self-respect or hope. Thanks to God's reverent wrestling, they experience the "tormenting joy" of "dwelling on sin," but "not in despair!"<sup>66</sup> God's reverent persuasion is not wishy-washy; God is faithful to the ideals which form part of the divine life, including the ideal of human freedom. Hence God reverently uses not destructive force but truth force, not coercion but persuasion.

At this period in history we citizens of the United States may hear the divine persuasion expressed through Latin American thinkers who challenge us to "dwell on sin" without losing hope. We may not be accustomed to theologians who write much about sinful facts and seemingly not much about ideal values; thus we may falsely imagine that they idealize class conflict. What they do is give an account of a class conflict already happening as a regrettable fact, then invite us to work together with them toward an ideal of reconciliation. "The Christian message demands that we move out of the whole schema of violence versus resistance to violence by the use of force as quickly as possible."<sup>67</sup> Violence includes starvation, torture, and threats. Violence is a sin, and "Resistance to violence is too, if it is adopted as a definitive attitude or if we allow ourselves to be taken over by its powerful dynamic. Christian redemption . . . must derive its life from love."<sup>68</sup> Love seeks reconciliation and the

<sup>64</sup> *MG* 224.

<sup>65</sup> *MG* 436.

<sup>66</sup> *CWC* 106.

<sup>67</sup> Ignacio Ellacuria, *Freedom Made Flesh* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976) 229.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 229–30.



liberation of the oppressors as well as of the oppressed. "One loves the oppressors by liberating them from their inhuman condition as oppressors."<sup>69</sup> As a people some of whom export arms and a national-security mentality, we in the United States should be grateful that liberation theologians love us and seek to free us from an inhuman condition. Their wrestling is one medium of communication through which God's reverent persuasion reaches us. Our common human experience of that divine persuasion is the ground of the hope we all share.

#### CONCLUSION

Situating this work on divine reverence in the context of an inculturated North American philosophical theology, I chose to develop my ideas partly in dialogue with Hocking and Whitehead, the two philosophers who have influenced me most strongly. The two are central to the United States tradition of philosophizing about religious experience and of philosophizing which is relevant to reverence. Further historical articles or book chapters could develop other contributions from the tradition. I suggest some samples: Edwards and divine reverence in calling us through beauty, Transcendentalist reverence for holistic nature alternating with reverence for self-reliant individuals, reverent interpretive musement in Peirce and Royce, God's reverent invitation to conversion and saintliness in James, reverence in Royce's *Suffering-Servant and Spirit-Interpreter*, reverence for the community in Royce, creative and receptive reverence in Charles Hartshorne's dipolar philosophy of God, John Cobb and the God who reverently calls, reverence and liberation in Schubert Ogden's *Faith and Freedom*. I sincerely invite other members of the philosophical and theological community to join me in addressing the topic of divine reverence.

What might be most worth remembering from the present article? From its method, some equipment: (1) Musement—a key to release from the prison of merely formal understanding and reasoning, the freedom to let our feelings and imaginations play in God's beautiful out-of-doors. (2) Whole-aspect alternation—a camera with both a wide-angle lens for vista-vision and a zoom lens for detail. (3) Mystic-prophet alternation—a rhythm to keep ourselves fully alive, a way for prayer to nourish action and action to nourish prayer. From the article's main sections, some experiences: (1) God's reverent presence—sustaining, zest-giving, direct. (2) God's reverent cherishing—mirroring back our greatness, suffering at our side, and giving us hope that the way of the cross is part of the road to the resurrection. (3) God's reverent persuading—liberating us from coercive idols, speaking with the still and small voice when we

<sup>69</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 276.

accept the invitation to grow, wrestling with us when we need the strength to accept a challenge to conversion.

What we have mystically contemplated about God's reverence for us invites us to show an analogous reverence for one another. Our prophetic deed of challenging the arms-makers, threateners, and torturers while supporting the food-makers, peacemakers, and justice-makers may have the lasting result of bringing our world-wide human community to fuller life, deeper reconciliation, and greater freedom. Yes, it involves risk. So does God's being present, cherishing, and persuading.